

Introduction

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs form a crucial component of the social safety net in the United States. Unlike a number of other social programs, food assistance programs provide benefits and have eligibility requirements that are essentially uniform nationwide. The Food Stamp Program (FSP)—the largest Federal food assistance program—is, with few exceptions, available to all Americans whose income and assets fall below certain levels. The other food assistance programs are generally targeted to specific demographic groups. Altogether, the 15 Federal food assistance programs collectively reach an estimated 1 in 5 Americans at some point each year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Federal Department charged with administering nearly all of the Federal food and nutrition assistance programs, has a particular interest in monitoring program effectiveness and contributing to the policy goal of a healthy, well-nourished population.

The purpose of the Small Grants Program is to stimulate new research on food and nutrition policy issues and to broaden the participation of social science scholars in the research effort. Grant recipients come from a number of disciplines and employ a variety of approaches in their research. They include economists, sociologists, nutritionists, anthropologists, and public health professionals. Some use statistical models to analyze individual and household response to policy changes. Others conduct exploratory research using ethnographic methods to examine underlying factors influencing program participation and outcomes. Still others use descriptive statistics to characterize the populations of interest. All the research methods contribute to a growing body of literature on the food needs, coping behaviors, and food program outcomes of low-income families and individuals. Oftentimes, the work supported by the Small Grants Program develops new theories or research methodologies, elements that become the basis for securing expanded funding from other public or private sources to further develop these promising innovations.

Small Grants Program Partners

ERS created partnerships with five academic institutions and research institutes to administer the Small Grants Program. Partner institutions have the advantage of being closer to the particular regional and State environments that influence program delivery and outcomes. Each partner institution provides a different emphasis on food and nutrition assistance research.

ERS chose two of the five partner institutions for their experience in conducting policy-relevant poverty research at the national level. One of these is the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. IRP has a history of research and policy evaluation, including previous involvement in administering small research grants funded by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. The second partner is the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. The Harris Graduate School of Public Policy, which was part of the Joint Center for Poverty Research from 1996 to 2002, has a

strong history in conducting and supporting research on what it means to be poor in America.

ERS chose the remaining three of the five partner institutions for their ability to direct research of policy interest to USDA, either on a particular subset of food assistance and nutrition issues or on a particular subpopulation of those eligible for food and nutrition assistance. Among these, the Department of Nutrition of the University of California at Davis brought to the Small Grants Program its expertise in nutrition education design and evaluation. A core faculty group focuses their research efforts on identifying meaningful approaches to the design and evaluation of nutrition education for ethnically diverse, low-income families served by a variety of food assistance programs. They view multidisciplinary research as critical to effectively monitoring the outcomes of nutrition programs.

The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) was chosen to administer small grants for its ability and commitment to conduct research on the problems of the rural poor in the South and its particular commitment to study the effects of welfare reform on this population. USDA has special ties to the SRDC because of its close working relationship with the region's 29 land-grant universities. The South also is of particular interest to USDA because of the large proportion of rural poor and rural African-Americans who reside in the region.

American Indian families living on reservations are a significant component of the low-income rural population in many of the Western and Plains States. ERS chose the University of Arizona's American Indian Studies Program (AISP) to administer small grants for research on the food assistance and nutrition needs and problems of American Indians. AISP is the home of the only doctoral program in American Indian Studies in the country. The program maintains close ties to the tribal colleges, which were given land-grant status by Congress in 1994. AISP also reaches out to Native American scholars in a variety of academic settings.

Research Overview

The research projects completed in 2004 cover five broad topic areas.

1. Economics of Obesity Two out of every three adults in the United States are now considered overweight or obese, a result of increasing prevalence over the past four decades. Obesity is both an economic and health concern to health care providers, nutritionists, and the general public. The annual health care costs of obesity are estimated as high as \$19 billion, with government health care programs covering a portion of these costs. The low-income adult population may receive both food assistance and medical assistance from government programs. Scorsone and Tietzen used county-level data from a Kentucky state health care program for rural low-income individuals to examine the economic burden of obesity among uninsured individuals. Kolbo, Khoury, and Bounds assessed medical spending that could be attributed to obesity in Southern states. Daponte and Cook used an age-period cohort analysis to examine obesity trends from 1976 to 2001 among the adult population, finding that all groups had increased weight during each 5-year increment.

2. Food Insecurity and Childhood Obesity. Not only is the prevalence of obesity rising among adults, but data also indicate that children are gaining weight at ever-earlier ages. Research indicates that food insecurity and the inability to maintain healthy dietary intake over time may contribute to childhood obesity. Rose uses the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to examine the links between food insecurity, food assistance participation, and overweight status in children to determine whether participation in food assistance program contributes to childhood obesity. Gibson-Davis and Foster utilize propensity scores to simulate comparison groups to estimate the effect of food stamps on food insecurity, an important methodological issue since study of food assistance programs is complicated by selection bias, or the inability to determine whether participants differ from non-participants in ways that correlate with outcomes of interest.

3. Food Assistance Program Participation and Household Well-Being.

Food assistance programs contribute to household well-being by providing program benefits that enhance access to food. To some extent, the additional food resources may allow the household to allocate its other resources to housing, utilities, childcare, and transportation. The programs serve a population of low-income Americans that is dynamic, with many people entering and leaving the programs each month. Research that examines household resource allocation and program participation over time can provide information on the decision-making process of participating households. O'Neil and Monroe looked at the short-term and long-term physical and psychosocial outcomes associated with obesity in low-income women in Louisiana, focusing on energy intake patterns related to the monthly timing of the receipt of food stamps. Joyce and Gibson analyzed the association between infant health and prenatal participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in New York City from 1998 to 2001 during a period when Medicaid rules were relaxed and a state health program provided increased benefits to low-income women. Waehrer examined the effect of WIC on prenatal use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana by pregnant women participating in the program. Herman analyzed data from an intervention to increase consumption of fresh produce among WIC participants to determine whether better access to fresh produce would result in sustained improvement of fruit and vegetable consumption.

4. Community Influence on Food Assistance and Dietary Choices.

A household's food assistance participation and diet could potentially be affected by community influence, i.e., factors associated with the local area rather than characteristics of the household. Such factors can be difficult to specify, define, and measure. Many times, research on community influence calls for an interdisciplinary approach that considers the various components of the community, including geography, culture, organizations, and ethnic groups. Hoyt and Scott use county-level data from all Southern States and a sample of other States to analyze how differences in State program policies and eligibility, in combination with county population eligibility characteristics, affected food stamp participation as implementation of welfare reform took place and Supplementary Security Income (SSI) enrollment increased. Parrish described activities by a Native American Indian community college to develop nutrition surveys for families with children ages 0-4, create a

database of food served by childcare centers, and promote the use of traditional foods as a healthy alternative to current diets.

Johnson described a school meal nutrition education intervention on a Native American reservation that increased healthy food choices in school meal menus to reduce childhood diabetes. Muhammad and Tegegne examined the food stamp participation of the Latino/Hispanic population in the South, a rapidly growing subpopulation characterized by a poverty rate twice that of the U.S. population. Steinberg et al. studied the impact of “Contract for Change,” a California nutrition education program involving a signed participant commitment to improve dietary quality. Dollahite and Dickin examined how the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, designed to provide nutrition education to low-income populations, has responded to changes brought about by welfare reform.

5. Welfare Reform and Food Assistance Participation. DeLeire and Levy examined how food stamps affect the composition of household food spending, analyzing data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey-Diary Component from 1990 through 2000 which provides detailed information on food expenditures and the demographic characteristics of a large, nationally representative sample of American households. London and Scott drew upon data from the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation's (MDRC) Project on Devolution and Urban Change to examine stability and change in food security from 1998 to 2001, the period immediately following the welfare reform of 1996. Reidy used linked administrative data from the mid-1990s through 2002 to examine how nonparticipation in both the Food Stamp Program and WIC affect the subsequent economic self-sufficiency of Illinois families who leave the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Onianwa et al. examined the food security status of nonprofit food assistance recipients in several Southern States by interviewing center directors and their clients.